DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 476 523 CE 084 989

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TITLE	A Question of Value. Achievement and Progression in Adult Learning: A Discussion Paper.
INSTITUTION	National Inst. of Adult Continuing Education, Leicester (England).
SPONS AGENCY	Department for Education and Skills, London (England).
ISBN	ISBN-1-86201-169-9
PUB DATE	2002-12-00
NOTE	49p.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, Renaissance House, 20 Princess Road West, Leicester LE1 6TP, United Kingdom. Web site: http://www.niace.org.uk (8.95 British pounds).
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; *Adult Learning; Adult Students; Alternative Assessment; Conventional Instruction; Educational Finance; *Evaluation Criteria; Evaluation Methods; Foreign Countries; Informal Education; Noncredit Courses; Nonformal Education; *Outcomes of Education; Policy Formation; Postsecondary Education; Relevance (Education); *Student Certification; *Student Educational Objectives; *Student Evaluation; Success
IDENTIFIERS	*England

ABSTRACT

The different views regarding what constitutes learning success and progression in England's post-16 learning sector and the problem of meeting current policy and funding priorities stressing tangible and measurable outcomes while simultaneously responding to learners' needs and preferences were examined in a discussion that drew upon policy documents, research, and survey findings. The discussion focused on the following topics: recent history and changing priorities; identifying achievement in nonaccredited provision; the different types of progression; soft outcomes and the value placed on them; long-term versus short-term effects; quality versus quantity; and adult learners' perspectives. It was concluded that it is vital to support initiatives and programs that enhance personal and social growth as well as educational and economic progression, as the Learning and Skills Council is attempting by seeking "robust" data on development, added value, and "distance traveled" in nonaccredited adult learning programs. The arguments and examples of best practice outlined in the growing literature on learning outcomes should be heeded when pursuing this objective. Otherwise, some key dimensions of learning might get lost in favor of technical mechanisms for measuring outcomes and progression and the values that tended to distort the post-16 system in the past may be perpetuated. (Contains 8 questions for discussion and 70 references.) (MN)

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a question of value

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Achievement and progression in adult learning

a discussion paper

Veronica McGivney

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A question of value:

achievement and progression in adult learning

A DISCUSSION PAPER

Veronica McGivney

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creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence

Published by the National Institute of
Adult Continuing Education (England and Wales)

Renaissance House
20 Princess Road West
Leicester LE1 6TP
Company registration no. 2603322
Charity registration no. 1002775

First published 2002

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NIACE's website is www.niace.org.uk

Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP record of this title is available from the British Library.

Designed and typeset by Boldface
Printed in Great Britain by De Montfort Colortech

ISBN: 1 86201 169 9

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Foreword

This is the first of two papers exploring issues to do with progression in adult learning. This introductory paper discusses the different understandings of the terms 'progression', 'achievement' and 'outcomes' in educational and policy discourses and in the testimony of learners, and considers how these reflect contrasting views about the purposes and value of learning. The second paper, forthcoming in 2003, will look specifically at progression routes in the context of current policies and practices in different education sectors.

This paper starts with a consideration of the values assigned to different types of adult learning by the different stakeholders. Opinions differ in particular about the value and usefulness of learning which does not lead to a qualification, and this is explored in the context of recent and current policy. The paper then discusses the various meanings attached to concepts such as achievement and progression, drawing on policy documents, research and survey findings which demonstrate that learners, educationalists and policy-makers can have very different perceptions of what constitutes learning success and progression. This raises the question of whether the gap between the values and priorities of policy-makers and those of learners can be bridged. While policy-makers and funders stress the importance of hard outcomes such as qualifications, jobs and upward progression to more advanced levels of learning, adult learners, whether in certificated or uncertificated programmes, frequently place most value on 'soft' outcomes such as increased confidence and feelings of greater self-worth. These are not easily quantified and much of the evidence available is based on qualitative evaluation methods which do not fit readily into official quality assurance systems.

The paper synthesises some of the main arguments around measurement of learning outcomes and ends with a consideration of the importance of incorporating learner perspectives more fully into systems for planning and evaluating adult learning opportunities.

My grateful thanks to the DfES* for supporting this work, and to Jan Eldred, Peter Lavender, Annie Merton, Cheryl Turner, Kate Watters and Carol Jackson for helping to clarify some of the issues on which this paper is based.

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Department for Education and Skills.

A question of value:
Achievement and progression in adult learning

Whose values count?

For some years now there has been a continuing debate about the core purposes and value of education, one marked by differences in the perceptions and priorities of the various stakeholders – those who regulate and fund education and training, those who manage and deliver it and those who benefit from, use or apply it – learners themselves, employers and wider society. Each of these stakeholders will have particular views and expectations regarding the quality, benefits and value for money of publicly-funded learning programmes.

Although education itself is usually assigned a positive value as something that is generally beneficial and good, the field of education is a contested one characterised by many competing interests and values. These can be socially, economically or academically constructed. Those who teach subscribe to a set of professional as well as personal values. Those who make post-compulsory education policy attach priority to economic values and therefore to learners who are able or likely to join the labour force. Learners themselves make choices which reflect personal, social or cultural values. For example, although these are broad generalisations, higher socio-economic groups veer towards higher status disciplines or subjects; male learners tend to value programmes that bring an immediate, job-related return; adults without qualifications or experience of post-school participation often value learning that is relevant and useful to their immediate life situation.

Values are implicit in what is taught and how it is taught and in the priorities accorded to different qualifications and areas of the curriculum. Formal and structured learning is, in general, accorded greater value in society than other non-formal kinds of learning, and formal education institutions value objective knowledge above knowledge gained through everyday experience. In schools, academic subjects and qualifications have traditionally been valued over vocational ones; in older higher education institutions, greater value has traditionally been placed on A-levels and full-time participation than on access qualifications and part-time participation.

Differing values are also embedded in the hierarchical distinctions maintained or created between institutions – 'Russell' universities are considered (and consider themselves) superior to the new universities; City Technical Colleges are considered

better than 'bog standard' secondary schools, and the title of a more recent creation – 'centres of vocational excellence' – implies superiority over other further education colleges.

Despite (and perhaps because of) the number of changes in aims and priorities that have taken place in the post-16 system over the last three decades, certain elements and the assumptions and values that underpin them have endured, rooted in traditions that vested interests are anxious to preserve in the face of the values and claims of other groups:

> *The established learning patrimony, although under challenge, has an enduring, stable character about it (...) embedded in institutional arrangements, norms, traditions and behaviours and thus has a 'taken for granted' character about it that is not readily amenable to change. There are also strong defenders of the dominant learning patrimony, among education theorists and philosophers, but also among the disciplinary 'tribes and territories' whose own canons of knowledge are at prospective threat from the decentring of knowledge and emergent new sites of legitimate knowledge creation* (Cullen *et al*, 2002: 27).

> *Thinking and policy development in the area of lifelong learning are conducted for the most part by officials, academics and teaching professionals whose mindsets reflect the comfort zones they occupy (...). Recently, recognition of the interests of other stakeholders, notably funders and users, has led both academics and the teaching profession to adopt an outlook more overtly geared to the defence of vested interests and manifested in a sustained aversion to change* (Brookes, 2002: 30).

As this suggests, the values of education professionals do not always coincide with those of the people who make educational policy. Policy values are most obviously manifested in legislation and funding priorities. In post-16 education, for example, there has been a strong policy emphasis on learning that is useful to individual 'employability' and, by extension, to the national economy. These values are implicit in quality assurance processes and they can disadvantage some providers as well as some groups of learners by implying that their needs and priorities are of secondary or lesser importance. The emphasis placed on full qualifications or employment outcomes can be as much an obstacle for education institutions with a strong access and equity ethos as for less practised and less confident learners.

There can therefore be a considerable gap between policy priorities and those of providers, as well as between what policy-makers and institutions value and promote and what learners value and want to achieve.

Some recent history

Over the last 25 or so years, post-16 education has been subjected to a battery of successive changes in policy and funding. These have provoked polarised views of what is 'good', useful and most appropriate in the field, as reflected in ongoing oppositional arguments around vocational versus non-vocational learning; education versus training; accredited versus non-award-bearing programmes; economic concerns versus access and equity issues (Duke, 2002).

As these dichotomies imply, a relatively narrow policy view of 'useful' learning – that which has an instrumental focus and is engaged in for utilitarian reasons – has come into conflict with a broader view held by many learners, tutors and other post-16 practitioners, that useful learning can take many forms and be undertaken for a multitude of purposes. In the 1980s, these opposing perspectives were reflected in a relatively simplistic and hotly contested division between vocational and non-vocational programmes, the first being perceived as involving 'serious' learning and the second as involving learning undertaken for recreational, if not frivolous, purposes. Most adults, however, do not make such a clear-cut distinction in their motives for learning which, as has often been stated, do not always coincide with the title or focus of a course. Feedback from learners in recent research typically showed that they have: 'a rich mix of purposes, and both long- and short-term goals, which defy categorisation as either 'vocational' or 'non-vocational (...). Most learners ha[ve] general aim rather than specific objectives or outcomes in mind when making their choice.' (Turner and Watters, 2001: 4).

Many working in the field of adult and continuing education have consistently valued the liberal and social purpose traditions of adult education above provision that is strictly functional or vocational. According to Cullen *et al* (2002), it was this section of the education community that was:

> *most rudely confronted by the instrumentalism of the competency movement and the thrust of a modern pedagogy dedicated to measuring outcomes and judging them against inputs. At a deeply defensive if instinctual level this was seen as an affront to learning for its own sake, possibly a denial of the uniqueness of each adult learner, their different experiences and starting points.*

The resulting clash of values was publicly demonstrated in the vociferous resistance from practitioners (and adult learners) to the proposal in 1991[1] to withdraw public funding from all but 'useful' learning. Although that proposal was subsequently modified, the thinking behind it informed the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 which drew a clear distinction between accredited and progression-type (Schedule 2) courses – to be funded directly by the Further

1 Contained in the White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century.*

Education Funding Council (FEFC),[2] and non-accredited 'leisure' (non-Schedule 2) courses for which local education authorities were expected to be responsible, although their legal duty to make 'adequate' provision was never clearly defined. This both perpetuated and reinforced the hierarchical value attached to different forms of adult provision and conveyed a clear message both to practitioners and to the public at large about which types of adult learning were to be considered a priority and which were not.

The funding and inspection system introduced by the 1992 Act placed strong emphasis on learning *achievement*, interpreted as accreditation or linear progression to a more advanced learning level. This had an inevitable impact on the kinds of programmes provided and the conditions of access to them. General and liberal adult education provided by local authorities was reduced or delivered on a partially self-funding basis, while non-qualification-bearing programmes provided by further and higher education institutions and other key organisations were driven into accredited modes and expected to meet certain output and outcomes. After 1992 'ACE experienced non-benign neglect as an unproductive activity, together with pressure to become more useful by moving to more functional, tangible and economically oriented forms of provision' (Cullen *et al*, 2002).

The new system inevitably encouraged some providers to drop, or seek accreditation for, previously non-accredited programmes, many of which had been targeted at new and less confident learners and those with learning difficulties. This led to a diminution of less formal provision for such learners and placed extra hurdles in their way. For example, if people with multiple and profound learning difficulties engaged in courses directly funded by the FEFC they were required to demonstrate the intention (and ability) to progress onto a higher level Schedule 2 programme, which was not always possible. This prompted one of the recommendations of the influential Tomlinson Report (FEFC, 1996), that 'progression' should be re-interpreted by the FEFC to enable horizontal progression and maintenance of skills. The system nevertheless remained in place until after the change of Government in 1997 and led to some hard decisions, as reported in Sutcliffe and Jacobsen (1999: 93):

> *In a landmark legal case in 1997, a judge upheld the decision of the FEFC to refuse funding to a 19-year-old with profound and multiple learning difficulties. It was deemed that he would not demonstrate adequate progression, which brings back uncomfortable echoes of the term 'ineducable', which was in use until 1971.*

2 Provision eligible for funding included: accredited courses leading to qualifications NVQs, GCSEs, GCE AS and A-levels; courses providing access to higher level courses in further and higher education; adult literacy and basic skills (ABE) and English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL), some courses for people with learning difficulties and disabilities (SLDD).

Although broader indicators of achievement were employed in the inspection criteria applied to LEA programmes[3] and those provided in 'designated institutions' (non-college providers (such as the WEA) directly funded by the FEFC), these were not taken into account in the assessment of individual college performance. This meant that institutions offering a significant number of non-Schedule 2 programmes found it difficult to meet the required quality standards.

The continuing legacy of the Act and the policy directions that preceded and informed it is that those areas of adult and community-based education which do 'not lend themselves to the forces of competency and vocationalisation' (Cullen *et al*, 2002) have remained marginal and vulnerable. In current educational policy, improvements in literacy, numeracy and workforce development are given higher priority than other forms of adult education and there is a persisting unease with the 'messiness' of less formal adult learning provision, especially those forms of it that are conducted outside of the education sector. According to Cullen *et al* (2002) this reflects 'a deeply entrenched patrimony of education and teaching' that:

> *cannot actually conceive of or value learning as its own process and end outside the education domain. The danger is of devaluing and further marginalising socially important learning activities, simply because they cannot thus be comprehended and corralled.*

There is, therefore, a continuing disjuncture between state purposes, as reflected in the kinds of learning that receive most public support, and individual purposes, as reflected in the kinds of learning in which many adults still choose to engage. To some extent the gap is inevitable. The privileging of learning that is directly related to skills, employability and the gaining of nationally-recognised qualifications is driven by concerns about national attainment levels and economic competitiveness, as well as by a desire to ensure efficiency and value for money in publicly-funded services. It can be stated with reasonable certainty that such preoccupations do not figure highly among individuals' reasons for engaging in learning.

Changing priorities?

Although qualifications have dominated policy concerns for more than two decades, there has also been increasing interest in other, wider benefits of learning. In the

3 The Ofsted framework used for monitoring adult education provision in LEAs listed the following under 'student achievement':
- Students achieve their personal learning goals
- Students achieve suitable accreditation goals
- Students achieve an appropriate standard of knowledge, skills and understanding
- Students demonstrate personal development
- Students demonstrate competence as learners
- Students attain their goals in terms of completion and progression
- Students show a high level of satisfaction.

early 1990s, FEFC-designated institutions were advised to find ways of identifying and recording achievement in the non-Schedule 2 programmes they provided, and in 1995, it was recommended that all FEFC-funded providers should develop and implement a framework specifying learning outcomes for such provision (FEFC, 1995). The Tomlinson Report (FEFC, 1996) stressed that accreditation and qualifications were not the only guarantee of quality and standards, and from the mid-1990s onwards, a series of other high-profile reports (for example, Kennedy, 1997; NAGCELL, 1997; the Social Exclusion Unit, 1999) formally acknowledged the value of non-formal and non-accredited provision in attracting and responding to the interests of new learners.

The broader benefits of learning were eloquently summarised in the Foreword to the Green Paper *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998) by the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett: 'the first senior politician since Churchill (...) who has spoken publicly, and with apparent conviction, about the potential for good which a vibrant adult education service has to offer, both to individual adult learners and to the nation as a whole' (Parrott, 2001).

The Learning Age prepared the way for the removal of the Schedule 2/non-Schedule 2 divide which was announced in the White Paper that preceded the Learning and Skills Act of 2000 (DfEE, 1999). In the remit that the Secretary of State gave the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the new post-16 planning and funding structure ushered in by the Act, he specified that, although qualifications are important, individuals should also be able to gain recognition for other learning outcomes (Blunkett, 2000). This requirement was duly incorporated into the LSC Corporate Plan (2001) which promised that allocation of funding would not be limited to courses leading to a full certificated qualification, as well as into the Common Inspection Framework (CIF).

The increasing policy interest in the broader outcomes of learning received symbolic expression in the establishment, in 2000, of two research centres – the Centre for the Wider Benefits of Learning and the Centre for the Economics of Learning, both situated at the University of London. The first of these is exploring ways of measuring the contribution learning makes to social- and health-related goalssuch as improved health, crime reduction, social cohesion, citizenship and active ageing.

Alongside these policy developments, significant work was also going on elsewhere to identify learning outcomes outside an accreditation framework. In the mid-1990s, a Learning Outcomes Group[4] was set up, composed of interested institutions, NIACE and the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA, now the Learning and Skills Development Agency – LSDA), to investigate methods of validating achieve-

4 This now includes members from LSDA, NIACE, the WEA, the Mary Ward Centre and the City Lit.

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ment in non-accredited learning, and an important colloquium on the subject was convened. A series of influential reports, conference and discussion papers has subsequently been produced by the group.[5] These have sought to develop a framework for recognising, validating and assessing learning achievements in non-accredited programmes and, with reference to a number of established outcomes approaches, to define the principles that should inform such a framework.

Or not...

Despite these developments, policy-makers and funders continue to experience difficulty in recognising the nature and value of learning achievements in less formal and non-accredited learning, as evidenced by the fact that the priorities that marked post-16 policy in the 1980s and 1990s and the language in which these are expressed, remain largely unchanged in current policy discourses and measures. In 2001, the Chief Inspector of the Adult Learning Inspectorate stated that the Inspectorate's 'core responsibility' was 'training for employment' (Press Release 2001, 0431). The same year, a former minister for higher education claimed that the function of university learning was 'to meet the skills shortage in the global market' (Rowland, 2001). The section on 'mission and long-term vision' in the LSC Corporate Plan refers to 'achieving aspirations of world-class levels of knowledge and skills, enhancing our national competitiveness' (p6).

Qualifications also retain their habitual place at the top of the hierarchy of learning achievements. While the White Paper *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE, 1999) recognised the unsuitability of formal delivery for many people and the need for non-accredited learning, it went on to state: 'we would expect the Learning and Skills Council to give priority to courses that lead to nationally recognised qualifications and – more generally – to encourage learning towards recognised qualifications' (p48). The Learning and Skills Act that followed the White Paper listed the learning provision that would be recognised and supported by the LSC under two headings – 'qualifications' (programmes leading to approved[6] qualifications) and 'other' (all other provision). Although there was an apparent intention to amend the second category title, it has not yet been changed. As a result, the vast range of non-accredited provision including the liberal arts, crafts and the performing arts; personal development programmes; community-based programmes; return-to-learn and wider-opportunities courses and provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities, as well as programmes leading to internal awards and certificates, now falls into the rather dismissive category of 'other provision', which implies that lesser value is still attached to this in policy. This has aroused fears that,

5 See, for example, Foster, Howard and Reisenberger, 1997; Vorhaus, 1998; NIACE/FEDA, 1999; Greenwood, Hayes, Turner and Vorhaus, 2001; Turner, 2001; Turner and Watters, 2001.

6 The number of qualifications actually taken outnumber those on the approved qualification list.

despite the expansive view of learning expressed by David Blunkett in *The Learning Age* and the rather short-lived optimism that his broader vision encouraged, the Schedule 2/non-Schedule 2 divide is being resurrected in another guise within a year or two of its abolition, thereby perpetuating the marginal and vulnerable situation of non-accredited learning:

> *A hierarchy of esteem in which external qualifications are deemed more significant, more worthwhile, and more worthy of public subsidy than 'other' forms of adult learning, must leave 'other' provision less well protected in any economic downturn. If all the new Learning and Skills Councils have learned to base their thinking and operation on this distinction, it will seem quite natural to their officers that 'other provision' should bear the brunt of the cuts which will inevitably be demanded when the next recession takes hold* (Parrott, 2001).

Identifying achievements in non-accredited provision

There is nevertheless a genuine desire on the part of the DfES and the Learning and Skills Council to find an effective and manageable system for identifying and recording the benefits of 'other' provision. The Council has been developing criteria for the eligibility of programmes for funding, and the signs are that it will be reluctant to invest in adult learning without hard evidence of impact, progression and rates of return. It is likely, therefore, that funding for locally-based provision will be dependent on there being clarity of purpose, achievement of identified outcomes and evidence of value for money. With the stated intention of promoting parity of esteem between accredited and non-accredited provision, the Council has contracted the Learning and Skills Development Agency and NIACE to assist in devising a methodology for recognising and recording achievement in non-accredited provision, which will 'allow aggregation and analyses at a national level'.

This presents a number of significant challenges, not least that of trying to find a single methodology that will fit such a huge and diverse field which has produced relatively little quantifiable evidence of this kind: 'There is remarkably little analysis that looks at how different forms of learning generate different effects' (Schuller *et al*, 2000).

As has been comprehensively argued in LSDA and NIACE documents (see page 11), any methodology for recognising and measuring learning achievement in non-accredited learning has to surmount a number of problems,[7] notably, converting

7 These were succinctly outlined by Maggie Greenwood in her presentation entitled 'Is it possible to benchmark outcomes from non-accredited provision?' at the NIACE conference Listening to Learners, 21 November, 2001.

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achievement of diverse learning goals into a comparative data set and identifying indicators and benchmarks that can be used across the range of subject and activity areas; that are sensitive to different learning contexts and that will provide meaningful comparative information across very disparate providers. Organisations that offer learning opportunities have widely varying purposes, values and resources, and as experience (not least in schools) has shown, differences in ethos, procedures and practices can significantly affect learning outcomes. As a practitioner at a recent conference observed, 'you can't get uniformity of outcomes because adult education is so messy, and you can't get the same outcomes across the piece for which you can guarantee a national standard. There is no comparability.' This difficulty was clearly demonstrated in a recent evaluation of the Adult and Community Learning Fund:

> *The sheer variety of activities, involving a wide range of organisations, using many different approaches, with a variety of target groups, makes comparisons between projects difficult (...). The organisations (...) and the learners themselves were at a range of starting points when they received the funding. Thus different outcomes could represent less or more progress depending on these starting points across different projects. (...) Some groups of potential learners are harder, and/ or more costly to reach, engage and support. We are therefore not comparing like with like, and there are few hard measures which are appropriate to apply* (IES, 2002: 52–53).

Some definitions

There are also some fundamental questions that need to be explored. For example, how are learning 'achievements' defined and who defines them: policy-makers, funding bodies, providers, course designers, tutors or learners themselves? There is a tension here since, as stated earlier, the values, perceptions and purposes of these different stakeholders do not always coincide

Over 20 years ago, research into achievements in adult literacy programmes revealed that learners' perceptions of their learning success could be markedly different from those of tutors (Charnley and Jones, 1979). Since then this finding has been repeatedly confirmed. A recent study of literacy students, for example, also found that learners' perceptions of their achievements tend to differ significantly from official performance indicators based on progress in the development of specific knowledge or skills (Eldred, 2002).

For over a decade, qualifications or moves to more advanced learning have been considered the most important evidence of the effectiveness of learning. Under the FEFC, college performance indicators were based on retention and completion and the numbers of students acquiring qualifications. However, while these indicators represent useful quality benchmarks for providers, they are widely viewed as inadequate proxies of learner achievement. As Perry (1999, in Lavender, 2000) has argued, qualification pass rates only measure one form of student achievement.

Qualifications are an ultimate outcome or product of learning, but during the learning process that leads to their acquisition, there can be a range of incremental learning achievements. When qualifications are seen as the only or main indicator of learning success, these are not taken into account. National audits nevertheless continue to interpret learner success as achievement of full qualifications: 'Success rates are the number of qualification aims achieved as a proportion of those started, even though students may subsequently have dropped them' (National Audit Office, 2001). But learners who leave programmes before completion of a qualification for personal or employment reasons may have achieved their learning objectives or may intend to continue their study at a later date. It has therefore been argued (UDACE, 1989; Vorhaus, 1999) that retention figures cannot in themselves be considered indicators of learning achievement, although they can indicate student satisfaction and motivation. As Lavender (1999: 12) suggests:

> *for everyone involved, including adult learners, we must have greater opportunities to value more than simply the pass rates for qualifications and the retention rates. We need a much richer set of colours on the canvas than we have available now, and some encouragement to providers that such work can be properly assessed for quality and value.*

The LSC's first draft guidance for local learning plans nevertheless continued to define achievement as completion. This was subsequently modified to 80 per cent attendance and achievement of 'intended learning outcomes' (2001a). The Interim Provider Performance Indicators stated that, until August 2002, the universal indicator of achievement rates would probably be achievement of a 'positive' outcome. This raises questions about what 'positive' means in this context, and who interprets an outcome as positive. A positive outcome is one which meets national priorities as defined in the LSC Corporate Plan (2001b). One of the national learning targets for 2004 is 'to raise adult achievements', these being interpreted as improvements in literacy and numeracy and increases in percentage of adults at levels 2 and 3. According to the Plan, this 'is not intended to imply an undervaluing of learning and skills at other levels. The levels stand as proxy for progress across the board' (p11).

One of the wider objectives identified in the Plan is to support and track progress towards 'value added' relative to the learner's starting point' (p7), and it is clearly stated that the Council will take 'a close interest in learning not leading to formal qualifications' although it will need 'to develop simple ways of calibrating such progress' (p11). There is also a welcome commitment to measuring incremental progress and partial achievements. The Council wants its objectives to be tracked and disaggregated to local and other levels, and to be supported by mechanisms for measuring and tracking individual learners' progress 'including elements or modules below the threshold of a full level or qualification' (p13).[8]

8 A discussion paper on this is to be produced by the LSC.

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The LSC's quality assurance process similarly interprets learning achievements not as a single outcome or end product such as a qualification but as the incremental gains made during a learning process. The Common Inspection Framework (CIF) lists these as greater knowledge, understanding and skills, occupational competence and 'milestones towards' qualifications or employment. Most importance, however, is still attached to the gaining of a nationally approved qualification. The Corporate Plan states: 'We will continue to place a premium on transferable qualifications which guarantee consistency and (in the case of vocational qualifications) meet employer-defined occupational standards' (p13). In keeping with this, the target set for improvements to adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL skills refers only to people seeking 'approved qualifications'.

Thus, despite the stress on learning 'achievements', it is ultimately the learning 'outcomes' – and certain learning outcomes in particular – that are still most valued in policy.

Are learning achievements and learning outcomes synonymous?

Is there a significant difference between learning achievements and learning outcomes? Throughout the literature, there is a tendency to conflate the two. There is, however, a distinction to be made between the incremental improvements in knowledge, understanding or skill mastery that occur during a learning episode designed specifically to promote such results, which can be termed learning achievements, and any changes or actions that occur as a consequence of that learning (personal change, acquisition of a job, specific applications of the learning), which can be termed learning outcomes. To give an example: someone learning French may, as a result of growing interest and linguistic competence, decide to visit France. This could be said to be a direct outcome of the learning but it is not a learning achievement. Vorhaus (2001) draws a further distinction between outcomes such as personal, social or economic development and 'learning outcomes' such as an advance in specific knowledge or understanding. The first may be causally related to a learning episode but not to the content of the learning, whereas the second is explicitly related to the *content* of the learning. Learner 'progression' could fall into either of these categories.

Progression

Progression is one of the (many) words used in education literature and policy documents which has no universally accepted definition. At its simplest it connotes the idea of improvement in the sense of an advance from a less favourable to a more favourable state or situation.

The concept of progression is often conflated with the notion of progress although the terms are not necessarily synonymous: 'We should distinguish between progress (which is at the heart of all successful learning) and progression (which is an outcome of successful learning)' (Turner, 2001: 7). While learners might be expected 'progressively' to acquire the specific skills, knowledge and understanding that a structured learning episode entails (and in this sense there can be progression within learning from one level of understanding or skill mastery to another (i.e. intellectual or technical progression)), 'progression' can also mean how people develop personally and socially as well as educationally as a result of their learning. The notion of an advance from a given starting point implicit in this has produced the idea of 'distance travelled' – an area of current interest in both education and youth work. Progression can also mean where learning leads people in terms of life change, further learning or employment.

In education and training policy documents since the 1980s, the term has been variously used to express notions of career advancement, intellectual development within a subject area or discipline, and physical progression through a hierarchy of levels and different learning contexts. Sometimes the word has been used to convey all of these meanings within a single policy document.[9] In the current educational context, the term 'progression' most frequently refers to learners' transition from one course or programme to another one, usually of a higher level, in the same or different learning environment. This notion of progression has given rise to the metaphors learning 'journey' or learning 'pathway' which are frequently substituted for the term. Other metaphors frequently used to convey the idea of learner 'mobility' are 'routes', 'bridges', and 'ladders' – all depicting movement through, across or up the existing system of provision.

Linear or vertical progression

As mentioned earlier, the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act placed emphasis on upward progression to learning at a higher level. In order to qualify for public funding, provision falling under Schedule 2 categories (d) and (j) was required to have progression to further learning as its primary purpose. Despite the abolition of the Schedule 2/non-Schedule 2 curricular divide, this emphasis has survived. The increasing application of 'levels' across post-compulsory provision is indicative of the value that is still attached to vertical progression to more advanced, higher level learning. The criteria for non-Schedule 2 pilots initially stated that upward progression to Level 2, Schedule 2 programmes should be a primary aim (FEFC Circular 99/6). Although this was eventually recognised as unrealistic, a linear progression outcome continued to be considered of key importance. Thus the main perceived value of the pilots was as a carrot to get people into learning but only as a

9 I am indebted to Michael Freeston for allowing me to see his insightful analysis of the language relating to progression used in policy papers since the 1970s.

route to the serious and more important accredited learning. This theme runs through current policy. Turner (2001:5), for example, has noted 'the growing tendency to refer to non-accredited learning as "progression" provision'. This was given symbolic emphasis in the title of the conference held to celebrate the non-Schedule 2 pilots in June 2001 – *Farewell NS2 – Hello Progression Provision* – at which Tony Belmega, Assistant Director of Policy and Development at the Learning and Skills Council described the LSC remit as: 'to encourage as many people as possible to progress – which ideally means progression on to qualifications' (Merton and Greenwood, 2001: 64). The LSC Corporate Plan states that the strong focus on basic skills, level 2 and level 3 'will not be at the expense of, but rather will tend to draw more learners through, Level 1 and on to Level 4 and beyond, and so encourage *progression*' [original emphasis] (p11).

The notion of getting adults onto an educational ladder pervades policy and quality assurance criteria as much now as it has done for the last 20 years. According to one experienced practitioner in correspondence with the author:

> *Adult and community learning is now associated with being a mechanism to lure people into other things rather than it being an acceptable way of engaging in learning in its own right. There is always an undercurrent of asking what people have gone on to do which suggests that the vocational obsession is only under the surface and that ACL is not real learning but a pre-cursor to it.*

Many practitioners and analysts, however, believe that it is inappropriate to regard less formal adult and community learning provision only as the first rung of an educational ladder and argue that, although it is important to provide incremental learning opportunities for all who want them, it should be valued for itself as well as a route to, or preparation for, other learning.

> *Community-based learning should not be planned with the sole aim of pushing students up an educational ladder (...). Each course is, or should be, complete in itself. To treat a course as no more than a ladder to the next course can have the effect of belittling the experience. As one tutor said, 'It's like saying that Monday is just a way of getting to Tuesday'. (Adkins, 1997: 135).*

Several years on, similar arguments are still having to be made:

> *(...) Evidence of learner progression, or more specifically the absence of such, should be viewed against the fact that for many non- accredited programmes, the learning achieved is seen as an end in itself and not a precursor to higher level learning or employment – although it might incidentally promote this.*
>
> *It would be unfortunate, and indeed ironic given the declared intentions of the Government, if the LSC should repeat some of the mistakes arising from the 1992 Act by subscribing to the assumption that non-accredited learning necessarily*

> *functions as the 'first step' in a progression ladder taking the learner inexorably onwards and upwards.* (Turner, 2001: 5, 7).

There is a strong argument, therefore, that participation in adult and community learning – if of good quality – should be seen as valuable in itself. As found in an earlier study (McGivney 1999), too great an emphasis on linear progression can foster the belief that adult learners are engaged in less worthwhile learning if what they are doing does not lead to a higher level programme of study. It can also suggest that lesser value is attached to those learners whose aims do not, initially at least, include upward progression – older adults; those learning just for pleasure; new and hesitant learners who are putting 'a toe in the water'; people with learning difficulties for whom horizontal progression is very important (FEFC, 1996). Individuals learn at different paces and for some, the transition from one level of learning to a higher one is a gradual and intermittent process. For very disadvantaged groups such as people with profound and multiple learning difficulties, progression often means extremely small steps and it would be unrealistic to expect participation to lead rapidly to a more advanced level of learning.

Recent research into learner views of negotiated learning outcomes found that 'very few had consciously chosen non-accredited programmes as a precursor to accredited learning' (Turner and Watters, 2001: 4). But it is not just a question of choice. The circumstances of many adults may inhibit immediate progression to a higher level course. People with considerable work or family pressures, for example, may not be in a position to move immediately to a higher level programme of study and their subsequent engagement with the education system may be spasmodic.

Vertical progression nevertheless remains a strong policy preoccupation despite its acknowledged inappropriateness for some groups of adult learners:

> *Curriculum planning has largely gone down the outcomes-led path, within a rational planning model. The ingredients of such a model include a tight coupling between goals and objectives, curriculum and choice of instruction methods, and assessment of learning and evaluation – consistent with the view of the universe as determinate and linear.* (Cullen *et al*, 2002).

This view of the universe appears to be based on the compulsory education pattern according to which children are expected to reach particular levels of attainment at certain key stages. There are significant differences between this and an adult situation, however. School involves compulsory attendance and children move vertically through it with their respective age cohorts. Adult learners, by contrast, are extremely diverse in terms of age and level of educational attainment, and they move in and out of structured learning at different times and for different reasons according to their circumstances, needs and interests. Given the huge diversity of adult learning intentions, we cannot assume that having achieved one learning aim, a person will automatically want to move on to achieve another. In fact there has

been abundant evidence over the years that, following an initial learning episode, an adult learning pathway may come to a temporary halt or meander in several possible directions. All the evidence shows that adults tend to move in and out of learning in an apparently haphazard and occasional way, rather than participating in the neat, consecutive and linear manner that seems to be expected – and desired – in policy:

> *For many adults 'progression' involves pursuing the same sorts of courses in the same sorts of settings; pursuing different sorts of courses while staying in the same setting; pursuing different (rather than more advanced) modules or degrees in further and higher education. For many adults such sideways progression is an important component in building confidence in their ability to progress.* (Munn, Tett and Arney, 1993: 17).

> *Progression routes identified in the [OCN] survey demonstrate that the rapid linear route is only one pattern: often there are gaps of a year or two, and sometimes learners dip down the levels.* (Mager, 1993: 122).

> *Many adults (...) require to spread their study over a number of years sometimes with long gaps between courses. They need integrated options which optimise individual attainment and ensure progression in line with the needs and aspirations of the learner* (Scottish Office, 1996: 8-9).

A study conducted in New Zealand (Harre Hindmarsh and Davies, 1995) revealed three dominant adult learning patterns: moving backwards and forwards between formal and non-formal learning opportunities (a zig-zag pattern); moving from non-formal to formal learning (a linear pattern), and moving between different non-formal learning programmes (a cyclic pattern). The study found that over the whole lifespan, adult learning pathways were likely to be characterised by the zig-zag pattern although there were some differences between cohorts. Younger adults and those pursuing economic advancement were likely to follow a linear pattern while those in their middle or later years or with caring responsibilities followed a more zig-zag route.

In this country, the cyclic or horizontal pattern – taking courses at the same level – has been found to be particularly popular with adults, especially women, as the evaluation of non-Schedule 2 pilots (Merton and Greenwood, 2001) has confirmed. This can be as valid and valuab le a learning route as any other. Reisenberger and Sanders (1997) argue that lateral moves enabling learners to consolidate and extend skills or develop knowledge at the same level, and 'downward' moves enabling them to return to basics or update knowledge and skills after a break from education, are at least as important as upward progression. If the latter is considered the most desirable model, the value of these other patterns of adult learning will not be recognised. This has been acknowledged in Scotland where a report from the Scottish Parliament's Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee has proposed that, instead of continuing to be based on

upward progression, funding mechanisms should be amended to support sideways moves of learners wishing to gain competencies in new areas at the same level. The suggestion is to give all people after completing their fourth year at secondary school a credit entitlement common to all qualifications. According to a member of the Committee:

> *We are keen to ensure more flexible pathways are opened up for learners, so that there is the potential to zig-zag up the qualifications framework rather than all progression being linear. A credit-based system allows people to enter and exit at any time.* (Member of the Committee cited in Wotjas, 2002).

It is difficult to encompass all the possible variants of adult learning patterns within a single term', hence Vorhaus (1999) has suggested that we might distinguish between 'progression', interpreted as moving forwards along one dimension; 'development' – moving forwards along several, not necessarily related, dimensions (as, for example, when learners experiment with more than one educational option or choose courses that build on existing knowledge or skill before moving into more demanding courses unrelated to previous choices); and 'equilibrium', as when people participate in learning in order to remain at the same level of competence (for example, older learners seeking to maintain physical and mental health).

There is, therefore, a broad consensus that learner patterns are more complex than the one-dimensional vertical progression model assumes. As Reisenberger and Sanders (1997: 7) claim, it is inadequate for explaining the:

> *complex dynamics or chronology of progression and the way in which adults dip in and out of provision, have voluntary or enforced rests, mix formal and informal modes and look to certain types of provision at different life-stages.*

It is also difficult 'to measure progression by conventional methods when learners move horizontally as through a climbing frame of activities rather than vertically up a ladder' (Merton and Greenwood, 2001: 36). Turner (2001: 7) therefore suggests that we extend the metaphor and see the 'ladder' as part of:

> *an 'adventure playground' for learning involving bouncy castles, roundabouts and slides. This might help to capture some of the richness, diversity, unpredictability and joy involved in learner progress and progression.*

'Unpredictability' is a key word here. Many adults re-enter learning without a clear idea of exactly what they want to achieve so any pre-determined notions of progression may be irrelevant:

> *for the majority of students who come back into education it is likely that their ideas about what they might go on to are still tentative and in the process of forming, rather than completely fixed. It is therefore important to allow adult returners to define for*

themselves what progression means, rather than imposing some perhaps rather simplistic definition on all returners, regardless. (Cordon, 1993: 25)

Thus, as concluded in an earlier study (McGivney, 1999: 10):

'progression' cannot be interpreted as a single direction or set of outcomes. It can mean different things for different people, depending on their characteristics, circumstances and starting points. What may be a small step for one may be a huge distance to travel for another.

Other forms of progression

Progression can, of course, take forms other than engagement in further learning. There can be:

- personal progression (for example the development of greater confidence, autonomy, self-esteem, tolerance and understanding; wider aspirations; changes of attitude);
- social progression (improved social interaction and higher levels of civic and social participation such as volunteering and membership of local organisations);
- economic progression (acquisition of skills for employment, gaining a job or advancement within a job);
- collective progression (when groups of learners move on together to achieve collectively defined goals or to create new local networks). Little work has yet been conducted on capturing group achievements and progression.

These forms of progression are often inter-dependent. For example, personal progression may be necessary in order to achieve social progression and it can also be a prerequisite for any significant educational and economic advances. Hence some surveys (for example, Maxwell, 1997) have found that many learners progress in several or all of these different dimensions simultaneously.

This implies the need for a broader interpretation of the concept of progression than the one conventionally used in education policy discourses. There also needs to be a shift from an understanding of progression as something that is restricted to individual learners, to one that sees it also as a group or collective process of change.

Some examples of 'progression'

This is not to say that adults who engage in non-accredited learning programmes do not 'progress' in the ways desired by policy-makers, although this may not be

their initial or primary aim or even an anticipated one. In 1994, a survey was conducted into the outcomes for adults attending part-time, non-accredited (non-Schedule 2) courses in arts, crafts and modern languages in Gloucestershire (McGivney, 1994). The findings, which could probably be replicated anywhere else in the country, confounded assumptions about 'seriously useless' 'leisure' learning. Responses from tutors and just under 900 learners, over 40 per cent of whom were participating in an organised education course for the first time since leaving school, revealed that the complexity of motives for participation did not sit easily with limited concepts of educational or economic usefulness. People were engaging in learning for a very wide range of reasons: for enjoyment and stimulation; to find new interests; to develop an existing hobby; to acquire or improve a skill; for social reasons; to help children with their homework; to further a family business; to find a new job; to broaden the mind; to build confidence, or just out of curiosity. In some cases, participants were acquiring skills in one course in order to enhance or complement those they were developing in another (often higher level) one.

Regardless of their motive for learning, a number of respondents objected strongly to what they perceived as an inappropriate emphasis in the research on instrumental reasons rather than learning for self-development, fulfilment, stimulation and pleasure. The following four comments are representative of the many critical reactions expressed in the comment box provided at the end of the questionnaire:

Enjoyment is never mentioned but it is a primary reason for doing a course.

Recreational cultural activities are of extreme importance in our materialistic and cash-oriented society

Any art or craft that calls for creativity is taken for satisfaction

Such courses as these, interesting, demanding, challenging, are invaluable to the nation's pensioners and those who have taken early retirement because:

1) *it keeps them off the streets*
2) *it keeps them from making violent demonstrations at Westminster*
3) *it keeps their minds off the scandals of wasted funds in quangos and extra admin layers*
4) *it reduces the risk of their becoming a burden on the over-stretched and under-funded NHS.*

The learning outcomes identified by respondents were as numerous and diverse as their motives for participating. A brief summary of these provides the kind of evidence of the outcomes of non-accredited learning that is often claimed to be non-existent.

Personal and social progression

Learners considered personal gains such as increased confidence and the discovery of previously unsuspected talents and capacities to be the major benefits they had gained from participation. Such gains had had a significant impact on the lives and future plans of many respondents. They had given some the courage to establish studios or own businesses; to sell the items they were producing and accept commissions. They had motivated others to return to work or to change their career direction, and, in the case of language students, to travel more widely and use their new skills in their work.

For many respondents participation had reduced isolation and led to a significant expansion of activities. Some were using their new skills in a voluntary capacity as a direct result of the classes they had attended. Attending a flower-arranging course, for example, had given previously isolated women the confidence to arrange flowers for church services, weddings and other social functions; to exhibit at local flower shows and to pass on their skills to people in day centres and voluntary organisations. It had also made a significant difference to people with learning difficulties and disabilities. According to one tutor:

> *Some of the students have spent up to 40 years in an institution and need the confidence to come into a class, sit, learn to walk, talk and communicate with able-bodied students. Two of them have gained in confidence to such an extent that they received a MENCAP award for achievement. Two others have been housebound for several years with severe back problems. Now, providing they have suitable chairs, they really enjoy arranging flowers and the new-found company. One student is an elective mute and little by little she has gained confidence and understands everything that is said, and is beginning to respond very quickly to requests to help and work with other students, passing things and arranging flowers. A woman who had a severe mental breakdown and no confidence to speak to others is now a delightful member of the class. She has taken over the organisation and running of the local church flower-arranging rota and has very successfully arranged flowers on a limited budget for weddings.*

Economic progression

The responses also indicated that many learners were using the skills they were acquiring to save money, to generate income, to improve their employment prospects or to help in their current employment. In all of the craft courses surveyed there were some learners who were taking commissions or using their skills for the benefit of others. A number of people who had been attending art classes had discovered they could sell their paintings and some had set up their own studios. Some respondents had completely changed career direction as a direct result of attending the courses. A woman who had taken upholstery courses, for example, had

gained sufficient skills to set up her own business and undertake commissions for pubs, clubs and schools.

Educational progression

The survey also produced numerous examples of educational progression. Participation in one course had given many learners the confidence and incentive to enrol in another, sometimes at the same, sometimes at a higher level; sometimes in the same subject or interest area, sometimes in another.

In virtually all the craft courses there were some respondents who had decided to take City and Guilds or other certificated courses in the same or different subject. One woman was so enthused by her course in china restoration that she was planning to set up a local University of the Third Age (U3A) group. A number of learners in art courses were also intending to take higher level courses and some had already enrolled in B.Ed and History of Art programmes. Some respondents taking foreign language courses had also enrolled in higher level, certificated college and Open University courses.

The survey also revealed another form of educational progression albeit in the opposite direction from that usually implied by the word. This was participation in a non-accredited (non-Schedule 2) course for the specific purpose of complementing, enhancing or broadening the skills and knowledge that respondents were developing in a higher level learning programme. This kind of complementary or enrichment learning is an important and possibly underrated feature of adult participation.

The survey as a whole demonstrated that respondents were progressing in a combination of personal, social and economic as well as educational ways. Their (sometimes indignant) comments, however, indicated that they valued what Lavender (2000) has referred to as the 'intrinsic goods' involved in learning: creative and intellectual stimulus, enjoyment, social interaction and increases in confidence, more than any education-, career- or income-contingent outcomes. This is a common research finding which again highlights the gulf between the benefits most valued by learners and those prioritised by other stakeholders. In the 2002 NIACE Adult Participation Survey the most frequently mentioned benefits or changes resulting from learning were not instrumental gains but self-development, improved confidence and social contacts. The testimony of Adult Learners' Week Award winners also consistently refers to more positive feelings and personal change as the major benefits of learning, as the following example illustrates:

(Before learning)

On reflection I was very apprehensive about returning to education after such as long time away. Plus my general fears about mot being good enough, too old, computer-phobic and a whole list of other reasons not to do it…based on my previous poor experiences at school and feelings of low self-esteem (…)

(After learning)

It seemed the more I achieved, the more my confidence grew. I looked forward to each day, eager to see what new challenges it would bring. Whatever it was I was up for it. It was a far cry from the person who not so long before was attempting suicide, unable to face another day. (NIACE, 2002: 43).

Soft outcomes

If one were able to collate all the adult feedback on the benefits of learning – both accredited and non-accredited – that has been collected over the years, it is virtually certain that the most frequently mentioned gains would be softer outcomes to do with feelings and attitudes rather than harder outcomes such as qualifications and jobs.

Dewson *et al* (2000a) have described soft outcomes as ones which cannot be measured directly or tangibly: 'They are intangible, subjective, a matter of degree rather than absolute, personal to individuals, and intermediate (in the sense that they can assist progress towards harder outcomes).' They distinguish between soft outcomes that are target-group-specific and 'core' soft outcomes such as key skills (analytical and organisational skills), attitudinal skills, personal and inter-personal skills, and practical skills (such as form completion and money management).

The soft outcome that is most frequently mentioned – and most highly valued – by adult learners is an increase in self-confidence:

Our most important conclusion was that learners did not primarily judge their success in terms of utilitarian objectives; they registered a feeling of increased confidence, often described as a feeling of being at ease within themselves. (Charnley and Jones, 1979: 175)

The most notable changes were in how people saw themselves and related to the outside world. The most predominant factor among the responses related to people's increase in confidence. (Reisenberger and Sanders , 1997: 24)

The learners recognise it, the providers and employers recognise it, the inspection services recognise it; that adult education is as much valued for the outcomes like 'confidence' 'raised motivation,' 'flexibility' and so on as for formal learning outcomes. (Lavender, 2000: 11)

For new learners, particularly the most vulnerable, the most important outcomes of a course are often those relating to the learner's confidence and self-esteem. (Grief *et al*, 2002)

The overwhelming indication that students felt that they were succeeding in literacy learning was an increase in confidence. Whilst many students could identify that they

> *were improving specific literacy skills and offer examples of using these skills in personal and work situations, the increase in confidence appeared to be the most significant outcome. An increase in confidence and feeling better about themselves seemed to be a characteristic of most of the learners and was evidenced in both their literacy skills and daily life.* (Eldred, 2002)

Recent research into practitioner views of the wider benefits of further education found that learner esteem and self-efficacy were considered to be the most important benefits, followed by independent thinking, problem-solving, improved IT skills and social integration. This again illustrates the perceived importance of 'soft outcomes' as well as the 'inter-connections between economic and non-economic benefits of learning' (Preston and Hammond, 2002).

There is, therefore, a continuity of evidence on what Charnley and Jones (1979: 89) referred to as 'the pervasiveness' of confidence as a criterion of success and its inter-dependent relationship with learning achievements:

> *Confidence was not usually an isolatable achievement. It was the bedrock of all other achievements; it infused and inspired the other achievements (...) lack of progress in the other achievements may be due to, and be evidence of, a fundamental lack of progress in confidence.*

Similar findings have emerged from research in other sectors and learning contexts. A study of informal learning in the workplace found that 'confidence encouraged more ambitious goal-setting and more risk-taking, both leading to further learning usually relating to the ability to execute a task or successfully perform a role' (Eraut *et al* 1998). A large-scale study of the learning acquired through active involvement in local voluntary organisations indicated that it had contributed significantly to people's employability and performance at work, 'but the key word which was mentioned almost invariab1y was confidence: it was the confidence acquired through membership of the local voluntary organisation which had enabled the skills and attitudes to develop, or to be deployed' (Elsdon, 1995: 67).

Hard and soft learning outcomes appear, therefore, to be symbiotically linked. For many learners, the new understanding and acquisition of skills acquired in a supportive learning environment creates a heightened sense of self-worth which in turn imparts the increased confidence they need in order to progress to higher levels of education, to apply for jobs, or to undertake more demanding skills. Charnley and Jones (1979:100) concluded that 'any attempt to persuade a student to meet the demands of society as a whole must follow after confidence has been established'. Thus, as Reisenberger and Sanders (1997: 25) have argued:

> *(...) confidence should not be dismissed as a nebulous by-product of a good learning experience but should be seen as an important outcome of adult learning which tutors should plan for and encourage.*

Charnley and Jones (1979) – whose findings are still very relevant – analysed evidence of increased confidence among literacy students and found it composed a number of observable and reported elements:

- An improvement in physical bearing
- A feeling of ease within oneself
- A willingness to reconsider personal attitudes
- An ability to assess evidence
- A willingness to evangelise [about learning]
- An improvement in self-reliance
- An improvement in assurance
- A diminution in anxiety.

These elements are not easy to quantify, but they are important indicators of personal progression which are inextricably linked with overall learning success. Such gains illustrate the 'added value' that learning can bring, in addition to any expected, planned or desired benefits.

'Value-added' or 'windfall' gains are commonplace in both certificated *and* non-certificated adult learning. Eldred (2002), for example, found that literacy students could identify not only specific literacy achievements 'but also a knock-on effect which influenced self-perception, personal happiness, family and work'. A recent qualitative study of family learning schemes showed that they are having a positive impact not only on parental relationships with children and children's progress, but also on parents' own motivation and interest in education.[10]

Existing learning outcomes schemes such as the one developed by the WEA attach importance to the unanticipated benefits arising from learning. The challenge – one that is currently being addressed by the Centre for Research into the Wider Benefits of Learning – is to find a mechanism for measuring their impact not only on individual learners but also on communities and society as a whole.

Valuing soft outcomes

In addition to being the ones most valued by learners, therefore, the value-added benefits and softer outcomes of learning such as increased confidence appear to be key to achieving the harder outcomes desired by government and funders. All the evidence indicates that they enable and facilitate educational and economic progression, especially among new and more hesitant learners. This suggests that the softer outcomes of learning – such as positive changes in attitude, increased

10 Summary of a presentation by Angela Brassett-Grundy in the report of the Inaugural Conference of the Wider Benefits of Learning Centre, held at the Institute of Education on 3-4 July 2001, London.

motivation, improved social and organisational skills, greater personal autonomy – should be valued just as much as the harder outcomes. According to Dewson *et al* (2000a), there is growing recognition that, by themselves, hard outcomes are inadequate for demonstrating learning success. In their review of 300 European Social Fund projects, they found that although most had some system for measuring soft outcomes and distance travelled, very few had 'aggregated micro-level information on individual clients' progress to arrive at a project-wide (macro) measure of soft outcomes' (p4). This is not a surprising finding. Quality measures for education and training have usually included more readily quantifiable indicators such as the gaining of qualifications or employment, retention and completion rates and upward progression to more advanced levels of education and training. As Dewson *et al* (2000) argue, soft outcomes and indicators 'do not lend themselves to calculation and quantification'. It is partly for this reason that uneasiness about the value of non-accredited learning persists.

> *One of the reasons why competency-based education and training has enjoyed privileged interest in the post-compulsory sector over recent years is because its outcomes are popularly considered to certain and largely indisputable, whilst those of other assessment methodologies are often held (to a great extent) to be vague and debatable* (Groves, 2002: 18).

Vorhaus (2001) has highlighted the problems involved in assessing soft outcomes. One of the difficulties he identifies relates to the distinction between learning outcomes and other outcomes. He argues that the development of confidence, which many courses seek to promote, is a *bona fide* learning outcome only:

> *(...) when it stands in a suitable relation to the content of a course, and it stands in that relation when we specify the conduct or product in which it is manifest and for which it is required, as referred to in the set of learning objectives. These, indeed, are the conditions all learning outcomes must meet, and they serve to distinguish learning from soft outcomes, whose specification either extends beyond the content of a learning programme, or makes no reference to content, as when we make the general observation that learners have developed their self-esteem or personal autonomy.*

Vorhaus argues that tutors cannot be expected to make a qualified assessment of something such as the development of self-esteem: this is a longitudinal task better left to the research community.

> *Whilst self-esteem is frequently an outcome of learning, it does not follow that it is therefore amenable to audit, nor that providers will have at their disposal the resources necessary to execute the task (...) Assessing self-esteem is something we can all make a stab at, but that is neither equivalent to providing accurate information to verify current levels, nor sufficient to allow a robust measure of its growth or diminution.*

Another problem Vorhaus and others identify is ascertaining whether soft outcomes are a direct consequence of a learning episode or whether they have resulted from other factors and circumstances in the life of the learner. Schuller *et al* (2000) at the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, assert that in order to gather evidence of cause and effect, we require multi-dimensional qualitative and quantitative models which do not currently exist. Dewson *et al* (2000) also observe that it is often difficult, if not impossible, to attribute positive soft outcomes and 'distance travelled' solely to an education or training intervention. Theoretically, however, the same problem could apply in the case of 'hard' outcomes. A person may participate in a structured learning situation in order to achieve a specific skill but may actually acquire that skill through activities conducted in another situation. Likewise, knowledge and information relevant to course content could be acquired from outside activities unrelated to the course. In other words, the outcomes, whether hard or soft, in *both* certificated and uncertificated learning, may not always result uniquely from the content of a learning programme. Nevertheless, more stringent criteria of proof are invariably required in the case of soft outcomes, particularly those arising from participation in non-accredited provision, and it has been noted that there has not been equal concern with measuring personal change or 'distance travelled' in qualification-bearing provision although it is just as important and relevant to learners who engage in such provision (Lavender, 1999; Merton and Greenwood, 2001).

It could also be argued that precisely because of the difficulties inherent in verifying and measuring soft outcomes, many practitioners actually take more care in promoting and noting these than they might in a more routine, tick-box evaluation of the steps taken towards the gaining of a qualification.

The standards of verification required for soft outcomes may, however, be impossible to meet without investment in tracking student behaviour outside of a learning environment:

> *whilst (...) a demonstration of will or inclination hitherto lacking, such as assertiveness in a learning activity or vocal participation in group discussion (...) may indeed be signs of growth in assertiveness or self-esteem, signs are one thing, adequate evidence another. Evidence of a soft outcome cannot be held to be robust if it is confined to a single environment, for it is unsafe to generalise from statements about behaviour in one learning environment to behaviour in either another learning environment or an environment of an altogether different type.* (Vorhaus, 1999: 22).

Could the same *caveat* not also be applied to a hard outcome? Is evidence of knowledge or a specific skill acquired in a learning situation only 'robust' evidence if these can be seen to be applied in other situations and environments? Some manifestations of personal change or progress during learning may have to be taken at face value. If during the process of learning, learners start to exhibit marked signs of an increased confidence and self-assurance that is visibly having a positive effect

on their personal, social and educational progress, then it is possible that this will have something to do with the learning process and the environment within which the learning takes place. The important question, according to Beder (1999: 123) in his analysis of the outcomes of adult literacy programmes in the US, is whether such personal changes persist and have a lasting impact on the lives of the individuals concerned.

> *Of all the evidence presented in this study, the evidence that adult literacy education produces gains in positive self-image (and similar constructs such as self-confidence and self-esteem) is the strongest. From a policy perspective, this is somewhat perplexing, since feeling better about one's self is not a stated goal of the federal adult literacy program. For this reason, perhaps, the question is not whether learners' self-image improves with participation, but whether improved self-image is a lasting effect that promotes impact in the human capital domain and reduces social dependence. On the one hand, it could be that reported gains in self-image are no more than the short-term elation people normally experience when they have completed difficult and protracted tasks. On the other, the effects might be lasting.* (Beder, 1999: 123).

This is something only student-tracking can determine – which brings us back to the distinction between learning achievements (for example, incremental improvements in literacy skills) and outcomes (how learners apply their learning and the difference it makes to their lives). The varied outcomes for literacy students found in Charnley and Jones' research (1979) included better jobs, more responsibility at work, better working relationships, greater employability, participation in civic activities such as jury service, committee membership and involvement in voluntary organisations and parent-teacher associations. These broader and longer-term outcomes flowed from the learning achievements and the increased confidence that these inspired.

Long-term effects

A major problem in investigating learning outcomes is that the true impact of learning may not always be apparent in the short term. In fact, some of the outcomes of learning may not be visible for some years after people have engaged in it. As Turner (2001: 7) has eloquently put it, there can be 'delayed recognition of learning, the deferred moment of epiphany, the eventual use of a skill that takes place some time after the programme itself has finished'.

The issue of time, then, is critical in making judgments about learner progression, and it highlights a certain contradiction in the policy preoccupation with learning outcomes. Lawson (1979) argued several decades ago that we can attempt to justify education by reference to characteristics intrinsic to the concept of education itself, or by reference to extrinsic purposes beyond itself such as economic growth, community development and social change. In recent years, policy-makers have

taken the latter position, seeing and valuing education mainly for its contribution to broader, *non*-educational purposes – namely improvements in economic competitiveness and social change, both of which are long-term goals that can only be assessed by longitudinal tracking which is rarely costed into course or project funding. Yet at the same time they have had difficulty recognising and valuing the non-educational gains that are observable in the shorter term, such as higher self-esteem and personal change, precisely because they are not strictly definable and measurable as learning achievements.

Moreover, to pursue Lawson's argument further, if learning is mainly valued for its contribution to instrumental goals beyond the immediate learning objectives and these are not achieved, official scepticism about the 'usefulness' of some forms of adult and community learning could be confirmed. Yet the short-term nature of support for non-accredited adult learning programmes and activities actually militates against the possibility of achieving the kind of outcome most valued by policy. A study of the impact of the Adult and Community Learning Fund (Tyers and Aston, 2002) showed that outcomes such as educational progression and progression to employment were evident only in those projects that were funded over a longer time-scale. Similarly, the evaluation of non-schedule 2 projects found that immediate upward educational progression was unlikely after very short programmes (Merton and Greenwood, 2001). This puts smaller voluntary organisations and other providers of less formal adult provision in a difficult position – they cannot meet the hard outcomes most valued by funders in the short time-scales for which they are often funded, but the kind of results they do achieve in terms of personal and social progression (which often lead to longer-term gains) are not valued, or may only be recognised if some means of formal measurement is introduced. But this may be difficult to apply in short time-scales, and may also be hard to reconcile with the ethos and processes of the providing organisation:

> *What funders are willing to pay for are hard outputs and outcomes – a target-driven approach that doesn't understand that turning around attitudes is not easily measurable in the long-term. What it boils down to is a lack of trust, especially in the voluntary sector* (community educator working with the black communities in conversation with the author).

This begs an obvious question: if support for adult and community learning – especially that which is targeted at disadvantaged communities – is short-term, how can measurable long-term benefits be expected from it? The Adult and Community Learning Fund has been widely welcomed because it offers:

> *a flexible framework to learning and a realistic approach to the outcomes it expected from projects. The minimisation of monitoring information required and the acknowledgement that clients who are hard to reach and difficult to work with require higher levels of funding was also seen as important. These factors should be considered in future funding strategy and planning* (Tyers and Aston, 2002).

Quality not quantity

This is not to argue against quality assurance procedures. All structured forms of learning require critical evaluation and those involved in their regulation, funding and delivery understandably want to maintain standards and ensure that there is value for money. This is widely understood by practitioners. According to Foster *et al* (1997), all learning opportunities should be able to demonstrate that they have helped students to increase their confidence, improve their capacity to continue or apply the learning, deepen their knowledge or understanding and acquire new skills. However, these outcomes are often more readily captured by qualitative than by quantitative methods:

> *Non-Schedule 2 project coordinators reported that learning outcomes were better defined in qualitative terms rather than quantitative and that it was difficult (and sometimes inappropriate) to measure the distance travelled by learners in terms of the achievement of standard learning targets and learning goals.* (Merton and Greenwood, 2001: Para 38).

The primacy accorded to quantitative evidence is viewed by many practitioners as unnecessary and inappropriate. To gain an accurate impression of the range of learning outcomes, *both* quantitative and qualitative measures are needed:

> *Evidence of learning outcomes need not always take the form of quantifiable evidence or evidence that lends itself to quantification and aggregation.* (Vorhaus, 1999: 22).

> *A mixed economy is needed, and one that affords parity of esteem to both qualitative and quantitative evidence.* (Turner and Watters, 2001: 6–7).

> *Numbers simply do not tell us what causes what; where numbers rule exclusively we abandon judgment, common sense and intuition – attributes that are essential in the quotidian management and experience of Adult and Community Learning* (Hooper, 2002: 14).

> *However small it may appear to others, achievement perceived by a learner as a 'giant step', a source of delight and pride, cannot be fully represented by ticks on a page or digits in a data set* (Watters, 2002: 11).

The inspection system and the Common Inspection Framework are still, however, strongly attuned to quantitative measures and these are seen as a necessary means of determining the nature and value of adult learning. According to an official at the DfES:

> *(...) in the context of Government priorities as a whole, the complexity of adult learning has to be reduced to common currency of some kind. The Department will be able to shift the ground a bit, but not much. In that context, quantification is absolutely necessary. The question is what measures we can develop that allow direct comparison of the value of adult learning with, for example, the value of an*

increment in state pensions or in National Health Service funding. That is the reality within which the DfES has to operate.

The LSC is currently seeking '*robust*' measures of achievement that can be applied to non-accredited programmes, and although the Council is open to kinds of evidence that differ from conventional forms of assessment, such as products, activities and smaller pieces of learning, there is a danger that it may resist supporting some valuable forms of community-based learning without *hard* evidence of achievements that can be aggregated.

The challenge for funding and quality assurance agencies, therefore, is to come to terms with the qualitative data and what is too often dismissed as 'anecdotal' evidence and to accept this in addition to quantitative evidence.

The challenge for practitioners is how to *present* evidence of learning achievements in a way that is acceptable to policy and funding agencies.

Judith Edwards[11] has perceptively referred to evaluation in adult and further learning as 'illumination with many torches, many holders and many angles'. A number of people can be involved in the identification of learner progress and progression, including – most importantly – learners themselves, as Tomlinson (FEFC, 1996) specified. A UDACE study (1989) identified three approaches commonly used in describing and assessing learning outcomes: *criterion-referenced* (achievements in relation to specified criteria or performance standards); *norm-referenced* (achievements in relation to a group); and *personally-referenced* (achievements in relation to learners' own starting points rather than to absolute or group standards). The last approach is crucial in adult learning in which learner purposes and starting points are so diverse.

Identifying achievements

Helping learners to reflect on their learning is therefore critical. Learners, both as individuals and as a group, should be encouraged and helped by tutors to define the objectives of their learning; to reflect on their learning and to identify and record both the desired and the unanticipated outcomes. However, if they are to be persuaded to do this, they will need to see the relevance and value of it to *themselves* rather than to others. A Learning Outcomes pilot conducted in the WEA Eastern District showed, like the Gloucestershire survey outlined earlier, that the learning for learning's sake ethos was very strong and learners 'did not clamour to describe themselves for the benefit of distant others'.[12]

11 In a staff development session for NIACE.
12 Reported at the NIACE Conference *Listening to Learners*, October, 2001.

Turner and Watters' (2001) research into learner views of outcome strategies suggests that there is potential to develop (and strengthen) systems for identifying learning achievements by building on learners' desire for individualised commentary on their progress and appropriate next steps. They found that the most important dimension of any outcome approach for learners was the satisfaction of knowing their own progress: 'proving this to others was secondary'. It was also found that learner feedback on their achievements could be limited because of modesty and fears of sounding boastful. However, Turner and Watters believe that recorded formative assessment related to agreed outcomes could enrich the learning experience, encourage more self-reflective and critical learners and promote a more equal exchange between tutors and learners. How could this be achieved?

Elements such as initial assessment negotiated learning plans and regular reviews to check progress and record progress against aims are already central to existing approaches to identifying achievement. There is also broad acceptance of what constitutes good practice in the recording of progress and achievements in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL (Grief *et al*, 2002). Existing practice in further education, adult and community education and youth work shows that a variety of tools and methods can be used to identify and record learning progress and progression – diaries, learning contracts, portfolios and records of achievement, evaluation sheets, log books and other written or visual material, learner and staff feedback (Jackson, 2001). Learners' own learning narratives (as in the diaries collected in Coare and Thomson (eds), 1996) could also be used as evidence.

In the 300 ESF-supported projects reviewed by Dewson *et al* (2000a), data collection methods included self-completion questionnaires, tests, portfolios, one-to-one reviews and recorded observations. Methods used to measure soft outcomes were scales of agreement with given statements, comparisons with normative benchmark data or previous records, achievement of stated standards and assessor/trainer views. However, while the researchers accept that there is a need to have more systematic measurement and recording of soft outcomes, they concluded that it is not possible to develop a single model for general use, as this would be too resource-intensive for many smaller projects or providers. They suggest, therefore, that projects should be encouraged to devise their own systems and establish baselines of soft skills, aptitudes and attitudes using longitudinal case studies, greater routine tracking of learners and piloting of different systems.

> *Our literature review and survey of projects illustrated the variety and range of activity in the realm of soft outcomes and also highlighted the difficulties of applying one model to fit all projects.* (p24).

The diversity of adult learning providers in terms of size, resources and learner profile would make the operation of a single definitive model for recording learning

achievement and outcomes difficult. A key principle of the Learning Outcomes Group has therefore been that the operation of any system devised for collecting and recording evidence of outcomes should be proportionate to a provider's resources. Other variables that need to be taken into account are learners' 'diverse capacities and levels of engagement and the content and duration of programmes'. (Turner, 2001).

Another important consideration is that adults' learning intentions often change during the learning process, and as negotiation of content and processes is an established feature of much adult learning, any outcomes agreed at the start of a programme could be subject to change. Initial assessment to identify starting points and learning aims could also be inappropriate and potentially off-putting for some groups such as older people, new and more hesitant learners and those who enrol in short courses principally for stimulus and enjoyment. And if learner goals are different from course goals (as implicit in the content) how are they to be measured?

Learner perspectives

What has been conspicuously missing in debates and decisions about adult learning provision to date has been the perspectives of learners themselves. It has been pointed out that the aspects of learning that are particularly valued by adult learners have not figured prominently in policy and quality assurance standards:

> *Words such as passion and love of the subject never figure in the prescriptions and requirements of central agencies with their focus on developing skills, gaining qualifications and maintaining standards.*
>
> *Measures supposedly devised for ensuring that teaching is effective have led to a bureaucratic account of learning that is limited by the straitjacket of predictable outcomes. Completing tick boxes of generic skills undermines the enthusiasm and passion of intellectual work. Intelligence and intellectual struggle cannot be reduced to predictable outcomes, however politically and administratively convenient this might be.* (Rowland, 2001).

This leads us back to the original question: can the gap between the purposes and values of learners and those of policy-makers and funders be bridged? Ideally, they should both be taken into account:

> *Adult educators need to value the achievement of both policy goals and learners' goals. To understand the true impact of their programs, adult educators need to pay more attention to the varied outcomes in learners' lives and communities. True assessment of program performance cannot be tied to a few limited measures.* (Bingman *et al*, 2000:14).

Current funding and inspection arrangements do ostensibly put the learner at the centre. An LSC document (2001b) stated categorically that the new post-16 system has been 'designed to ensure that the interests of the learner come first and are of paramount importance'. Another document (ALI *et al*, 2001) pledged that the views of learners would be systematically collected. Tri-annual surveys of learner satisfaction are being conducted and the first one is already in train. The first pilot inspections by the Adult Learning Inspectorate have reportedly focused largely on the experiences and expectations of learners, with learner nominees included in the inspection process (although some feel this approach is too tokenistic). All of this implies a genuine intention to reconcile official priorities with learner needs and values. But whose voices really count in debates around what constitutes successful or effective learning?

There is a view that the views and interests of learners are *not* currently accorded the highest priority, and that learners' perspectives still have to be fitted into a policy arena: 'There is a tendency in policy to accommodate the preferences of funders and managers to a point that is now detrimental to the interests of students and tutors' (Vorhaus, 1999: 22).

On the face of it, therefore, the perspectives of the different stakeholders may be difficult to reconcile and learning that is considered relevant and useful by learners may fail to meet the criteria of usefulness required by policy-makers:

> *Adult learners can 'make progress' in and from their learning in ways that are meaningful to themselves but not easily translatable into the performance indicators required by educational policy-makers.* (Percy and Ward, 1991).

> *Individuals, in different times and places, hold many and diverse attitudes to learning. (...) Few of these align neatly with the expectations of those whose interests depend on maintaining the existing system or who hold an altruistic belief in the moral virtues of learning.* (Brookes, 2002:30).

> *...from a moral perspective, the 'value' of any particular course has to be based on the real life experience of those who are actually in or close to the learning situation. Because they alone are in a position to make meaningful judgements about what has been experienced and how their lives have been affected.*

> *Self-directing adult learners in a democracy will always want and expect to be involved in deciding what is of value to them. Their judgment may not always coincide with their local professional's notion of 'adding value', let alone with any governmental 'official' version.* (Parrott, 2002:24, 26).

Finding the right balance

The policy requirement for measurable and analysable data inevitably has an impact on the nature and supply of adult learning opportunities. As an aggrieved subscriber to the NIACE Lifelong Learning mail group has found, 'it is increasingly difficult to gain support for qualitative work; numbers, statistics, benchmarking and results seem to be higher on the agenda year by year'. Yet measurement, it has been argued, 'does not in itself guarantee rigour, accuracy or sound judgements' (Turner, 2001:8). Moreover, an important dimension that seems to get lost in the preoccupation with measurement is process, which, as all evidence shows, is a crucial element of learning. Participation in the process of learning (if it is good quality learning) should be seen as important and of value in itself.

> *Learning can be seen as a product or outcome. Current formal education relies heavily on this product approach to learning. It is concerned with specifying what is to be learnt, via curriculum, and what is actually learnt, via performance indicators. The way in which learning happens – the process – is given less emphasis.* (Doyle, 2001: 5).

At a time when 'light-touch audit' is a recurrent theme in current policy, it is important to avoid a situation in which the learning provision available for adults is over-determined and over-regulated by funding and inspection processes. Turner and Watters (2001:6) therefore stress the need for the emerging funding and quality assurance methodologies to distinguish between what is valuable and what is measurable – 'these are not synonymous'.

Although there is token acknowledgement of the breadth and richness of adult learning, official thinking will always try to confine learning within easily definable, readily understood, standardised and measurable parameters. And given that there will always be achievement and outcome targets, it is up those of us working in the field to ensure that these are the *right* targets and help practitioners to meet them. This means that we need to try and change narrow understandings of concepts such as 'achievement' and 'progression' and persuade those in policy-making and funding roles to accept broader interpretations of these terms and to accept qualitative as well as quantitative evidence of the varied outcomes for learners.

We need a wider debate about what types of learning are funded and what are not, and an end to what an experienced community educator has described as 'the idiotic characterisation of some adult learning as meaningful and some as frivolous' (Price, 2001:12). Unless what is valued by adult learners themselves is genuinely taken into account in the regulation, funding, content and delivery of learning, then no amount of encouragement, compulsion or proselytising will bring about a real change in adult participation patterns:

> *Willingness to learn throughout life will develop only from demonstrated value, assessed increasingly against real and personal criteria.* (Brookes, 2002:31).

It is essential that the design of these developing processes, indicators and standards should recognise those aspects of learning that learners identify as being both in their interests and of interest to them. Without this, any system to fund, inspect or manage achievement will be significantly poorer and at risk of failure. (Turner and Watters, 2001:2).

The last time there was a national inspectorate report in England on basic skills provision for adults, it showed very clearly that the quality of what was provided suffered whenever the curriculum was based around the qualification rather than the needs of the individual. (Lavender, 2002).

Similar views have been expressed in the US in relation to the measurement of success in adult literacy programmes. Although referring to a set of programmes conducted in accordance with different legislation in a different culture, the arguments below have a very familiar ring:

Achievement of mandated measures does not necessarily mean positive changes in learners' lives.... Adult educators tend to focus efforts on what is measured and reported, particularly if funding is tied to it. Are we measuring and focusing on what is important? It is not clear that a consensus on desired outcomes has been reached or that everyone has had a voice in determining what is measured. Adult basic education runs the risk of not meeting the needs of those adults whose goals for participation in adult education do not include (or go beyond) employment or a secondary credential. Adults whose goals are not being addressed by adult education programmes will leave.

Adult education programs should be accountable for their performance. But their understanding of performance needs to be broad enough to take into account the varied needs and wants of adult learners and the varied contexts of their communities. (Bingman *et al*, 2000:14).

If there is a genuine intention to encourage more people to learn, policy-makers and funders need to ask themselves why so many adults choose to participate in less formal learning rather than formal and assessed learning programmes. The answer is not hard to find and has been frequently supplied:

Many students in adult education have no desire or need to progress anywhere, at least in the sense of taking a further course or finding a new job. Their personal lives may be in need of enrichment, and the pleasure they get from a class in poetry appreciation or flower arranging may be just and as much as they are looking for... For students like these, what is most sought after is a productive and congenial learning environment, which assists their development by means of knowledgeable teaching and insightful feedback. In these cases, retrospective judgements and grades are an irrelevance at best, and unwanted intrusion at worst. (Vorhaus, 1999:22).

The opportunity to study without qualifications was widely appreciated. Reference was made both to the lack of pressure and competition associated with qualifications, and to the dignity of having greater choice about what was learned. This was described as an 'adult' approach and something that distinguished their experience from school. (Turner and Watters, 2001:3).

Many of the socially excluded, non-participating members of society will only be wooed back to education by stress-free and confidence-enhancing learning activities, not by the implicit invitation to come and take (and fail?) some more exams. If such learning is to be regarded as less important or 'other' than the real business of obtaining qualifications, what message does that convey? Many elderly people have no interest in more qualifications; if they are to be excluded from the mainstream lifelong learning vision, what does 'lifelong' really mean? (Parrott, 2001).

In other words, people choose and value this kind of learning precisely because it meets their needs and is less formal. It is important, in view of this, to support learning that encourages participation and does not necessarily involve the pressure of external assessment. If monitoring and assessment systems are too prescriptive, the non-threatening features of adult and community learning which account for its appeal for many new learners will be lost. It would be ironic if the standards applied across the post-16 system become so rigorous that they rule out support of locally-based learning activities that attract the groups most resistant to more formal provision. This has already happened in some areas:

The emphasis on progression and the types of evidence we are required to produce are leading to a narrowing of the diversity of provision at the first stage of return to learning. Provision now largely has to be marketed and developed with a very firm focus only on preparation for educational progression. This makes it difficult to attract and work with students who have traditionally been excluded, and who until they have a positive experience of participation, are unlikely to see any value in participating in a course that prepares them for progression in the educational system. (practitioner quoted in McGivney, 1999).

A funding system is therefore required which supports non-accredited learning but 'does not straitjacket it within a model devised for a different purpose' (Merton and Greenwood, 2001:35). The example of the Adult and Community Learning Fund has shown very clearly that more flexible and less formal provision that is not tied to specific outcomes is very effective in engaging new learners.

The fund recognised that if projects were to work effectively with the most disengaged and disenfranchised individuals within communities that it would be unrealistic to impose a rigid definition of what does and does not constitute acceptable progress. The importance of softer outcomes (e.g. greater self confidence, better timekeeping, more self belief, increased motivation) should be acknowledged in future funding strategies. (IES, 2002: 82).

This is not to imply that upward progression involving levels, accreditation and qualifications is not important. Many individuals who participate in non-accredited learning eventually want to engage in learning that is formally recognised. Qualifications act as 'tickets' in this society. As Reisenberger (2000:44) points out, they will continue to be essential for learners (as a nationally recognised passport to further learning and jobs), for Government (to show that standards are rising and targets met) and for employers (as an understandable currency to use in selection criteria). Qualification-bearing provision is therefore extremely important but, in view of the value already placed on it in policy, needs little further advocacy.

It is indisputable that large numbers of adults return return to learning to gain qualifications or to improve their career prospects. But not everyone needs or wants qualifications. Accreditation creates a fail or pass culture and for some individuals, any kind or level of accreditation may be a formidable barrier to participation. Moreover, qualifications, especially lower ones, do not automatically produce an economic pay-off. There are a lot of people who have 'pieces of paper ' but still cannot get a job. In conversation with the author, a woman commented that after taking a literacy qualification some years ago: 'I never got a job but I found I could talk to people' – a result that she considered of greater importance.

Many people also learn for an immediate rather than future purpose, to support what they are doing in life at the moment. They have no desire or intention to progress onwards and upwards. Thus, as has frequently been pointed out, broader and more flexible measures of achievement are needed which are attuned to the needs of learners and simultaneously meet the requirements of other stakeholders. This means trying to maintain a balance between policy values and the interests of communities and individual learners:

> *We should ensure that education for the development of character, intellectual capacities and self-help in the voluntary sector continues to prosper and develop, not merely on order to secure important routes for employment or access to further learning, but equally, in the Aristotelian tradition, to promote civic and social responsibility and knowledge. As well as preparation for employment and access to vocational education, we should protect and develop democratic adult education in our communities so that they may develop knowledge and capacities.* (Gurnah, 1997: 15).

It is vitally important to support initiatives and programmes that enhance personal and social as well as educational and economic progression and that, to its credit, is what the Learning and Skills Council is trying to do by seeking 'robust' data on development, added value and 'distance travelled' in non-accredited adult learning programmes. In the pursuit of this objective, however, the arguments and examples of best practice outlined in the growing literature on learning outcomes should be

heeded.[13] If they are not, some key dimensions of learning may get lost in favour of technical mechanisms for measuring outcomes and progression, and there is a danger that the same values that have to some extent distorted the post-16 system in the past may be perpetuated.

Some questions for discussion

Whose voices really count in debates around what constitutes effective and successful adult learning?

Are we clear what we mean when we use the terms 'learning outcomes', 'learning achievements' and 'progression'?

How can we ensure that the notion of 'progression' is understood and valued in a broader sense than just an upward move to more advanced learning?

Have we become over-concerned with outcomes at the expense of process in learning?

What methods are currently being employed to identify and record learner achievements and outcomes? Which methods have proved most effective and acceptable to learners?

Would a single method for identifying outcomes in all non-accredited learning be appropriate or feasible?

Is it possible to devise measures of achievement and progression which will meet both the needs and priorities of learners and the requirements of other stakeholders?

How can we ensure that the views and wishes of learners are genuinely taken into account in educational planning and quality assurance systems?

13 At time of writing, LSDA and NIACE have developed some guiding principles and an outline methodology for recognising achievements in non-accredited learning. These will be discussed by LSC and disseminated for consultation.

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A Question of Value

Achievement and progression in adult learning

Veronica McGivney

At a time when identifying and measuring learning outcomes, especially those from non-accredited learning, has become a particular policy concern, this paper provides a useful and accessible synthesis of the understandings of terms such as achievement, outcomes and progression in adult learning.

The paper starts with consideration of the different values assigned to adult learning by different stakeholders. Opinions differ in particular about the value and usefulness of learning that does not lead to a qualification, and this is explored in the context of recent and current policy. The paper draws on policy documents, research and survey findings to demonstrate that learners, educationalists and policy-makers can have very different perceptions of what constitutes learning success and progression.

The publication provides a useful exploration of the current conundrum facing those working in the field of post-16 learning – how to meet current policy and funding priorities which stress tangible and measurable outcomes and simultaneously respond to the needs and preferences of learners many of whom value softer outcomes.

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ISBN 1-86201-169-9

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